Promoting and Resisting Student “Success”: Critical Information Literacy Instruction in the Neoliberal Academic Library

Ian Beilin, Columbia University
First stop: “Neoliberalism”
Problems with Neoliberalism?

“…for neoliberals, humans are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*. This was not so for classical economists, where we were market creatures in the economy, but not in civic, familial, political, religious, or ethical life.”  Wendy Brown

“Noeliberalism is the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy, not just in the United States but across the planet, and will be for the foreseeable future.”  Noam Chomsky
Neoliberalism in LIS

“Neoliberalism creates a discursive framework in which the value of information is determined by its ability to be monetized.” (Cope 2015)

“…LIS must address how neoliberal conceptions of the market have shaped the ways in which information and knowledge are viewed.” (Cope 2015)
Yes, Here’s Your Neoliberal Library!
Neoliberalism in Information Literacy Instruction

Following the leader?

ACRL Standards (2000)

ACRL Framework (2015)
Critical Pedagogy and IL Instruction

“...education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction.” (Freire 72)
Student Success and the Academic Contract

Student \(\rightarrow\) apply, pay tuition, attend

College/University \(\rightarrow\) graduate w/degree

(Professional Qualifications \(\rightarrow\) Job)
Libraries’ Role in the Contract
Isn’t this what academic libraries always did?

sort of

Wren Library (1695)
Cambridge University
The Purpose(s) of Higher Education

Training for professions

Education for elites

Providing skilled labor for industry
1960s and beyond (and before!)
Post 1970s: Neoliberalism

The beginning of austerity in higher education

Protesting student fee increases,
University of London,
1975
Today: evisceration of public education through defunding AND philanthropy

“Our students are afraid of rich people,” Ms. Dubinsky said over lunch recently. “And then they meet with them and sit down with them and say, ‘O.K. they’re fine.’”

- Rich donor on giving money to LaGuardia Community College (NYT, 11/14/14)
Academic Libraries Today
Information Literacy and Student Success
Teaching success: two levels

Success according to the contract +

success in enabling/activating/realizing critique
Students already feel the tension

“…This reminds me of something from philosophy. The more funding means you will get pay more. isn’t that what most college students have in mind? but in philosophy, they teach you to do what you are most capable of.”
Conventional Academic Success and Revolution: A Long Tradition

Angela Davis with Herbert Marcuse
Teaching for revolution?

What are the limits of what’s possible?

- context
- time
- problem of privilege
Always keep alternative meanings of success in view
Praxis

Pay heed to your particular context
Not only the ‘information needs’ of students, but their position, culturally, socially, economically, politically – to their peers, their institution, to you, and to their fields of study/disciplines/careers